

# The Legend of Jedediah Smith

Don't know whether he actually carried the Good Book through the west in those early years. The story goes he took carried a copy of the *Journals of Lewis and Clark*, but whether or not he lugged the scriptures along may not be all that important. What nobody doubts was that Jedidiah Smith forever carried the Good Book in his heart, which made him peculiar among fur-trappers who traveled the Great River Trail, circa 1820.

He didn't carp about religion, didn't hound people like some old parson. He just kind of lived it, selfless. Everybody knew it.

Jedidiah was born in 1799, at a place called Jericho, New York. Of his parents' fourteen kids, he was number six. Like others, Jedidiah Smith got a taste for the west, for the wilderness beyond. When he spotted a fur company ad looking to recruit men, he left Jericho for St. Louis, wild and lawless.

If you think I'm lying, stop by the Sgt. Floyd River Boat Museum and look for a beaver hat--not coonskin, beaver. They've got one. Millions of Europeans went beaver hat-crazy. If you wanted to be someone, sir, you needed a beaver hat, which made the trapping beaver one of the best ways to make a life.

Jedidiah Smith joined a crew of fur trappers that came that passed this way up the Missouri, I'm sure, on their way north and west. But this Jedidiah wasn't just another adventurer. What he pocketed went back to Jericho. His aging parents had nothing. "It is that I may be able to help those who stand in need that I face every danger," he told his brother in a letter, "--it is for this that I traverse the mountains covered with eternal snow--it is for this that I pass over sandy plains in the heart of summer. . ." Then he wrote, "Let it be the greatest pleasure that we can enjoy to smooth the pillow of [our parents] age and as much as in us lies, take from them all cause of trouble."

This Jedidiah Smith was straight-up good.

Didn't take long for myths to build. He made his reputation when he stood fast in a firestorm, a surprise attack by several hundred Rees on ninety trappers in the employ of the Great Missouri Fur Company, an attack that did not fare well for the Company.

It was Jedidah's first trip up the river. It wouldn't be his last, but it would be the trip that created an aura because he stood fast on a sandbar, protecting horses they'd traded. As everyone who survived saw with their own eyes, Jedidiah Smith was the last to leave.

What the boss understood once his boats pulled away far enough to escape the rain of bullets was that his crew would need help. He asked for a volunteer. Guess who raised his hand--a young guy who'd never been anywhere near the Missouri before.

Jedidiah had fought to the bitter, bloody end, then volunteered to chase down river and bring help. All of that didn't go unnoticed.

And then there was this. Twelve men died in that bloody fight; of the eleven more wounded, two would die soon. They'd seen one of their friends sliced up horribly. Now, the dead had to be buried. Whatever else his steadfast faith gifted him to do, he had a level of peace that went way beyond most fighting mountain men. "Then let us come forward with faith," he wrote in his journal, "nothing doubting, and He will most unquestionably hear us."

That he would step forward at the burial of the company's dead that day makes all kinds of sense. Jedidiah Smith volunteered to stand up in front of the others, hands folded, head bowed, to offer a prayer, a prayer Hugh Glass later described with these few words: "Mr. Smith, a young man of our company made a powerful prayer which moved us all greatly."

People like to say, that funeral out in the wilds was the first act of Christian public worship anywhere near the Upper Missouri. It wasn't the end of Jedidiah Smith's fur-trapping adventures on the Missouri River, only the beginning.